"MOUNTAIN MOONSHINING" IN EAST TENNESSEE

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FOR 160 years or more a regional association has existed between the Appalachian hill lands and the illicit manufacture of corn whisky—"mountain moonshine." From the time of the Whisky Rebellion in western Pennsylvania, in September, 1794, to the present day the federal and state governments have wrestled with the problem, their concern stemming primarily from loss of taxes and, in the southern Appalachians, the existence of large blocks of dry or prohibition territory.[1] How much of the present illicit manufacture is the result of economic pressure, how much is a reflection of a traditional pattern of life in which a small still was as much a part of mountain occupance as the spinning wheel, and how much is attributable to increased federal and state taxes on legal beverages is difficult, if not impossible, to determine.

The industry has prevailed in many mountain and hill-country settlements since the earliest days of the pioneer. The Appalachian mountaineer, under economic pressure, with a long-established way of life and a "mountain yeoman" complex, found that one of his crops, corn, was difficult to transport and of low value; by turning some of it into a beverage high in value per unit of weight and compact to transport, he could realize a greater profit. Furthermore, today a ready market is at hand, both in his home region and among neighboring "flatlanders." The jokes and cartoons about the Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, and other Appalachian moonshiners, probably regarded as such by distant persons, have a basis in fact. The *weekly* manufacture of moonshine in the mountains of Tennessee alone is estimated to be about 25,000 gallons, and in the state about 32,000. In a single month (April, 1955) 94 stills were destroyed by state and federal agents in East Tennessee alone, 23 of them in one day, and raids by county sheriffs brought the regional total to about 140.

Obviously, geographic distribution of the moonshine industry cannot be accurately mapped, but only the distribution of destroyed stills (Figs. 1 and 2). What percentage these form of the total number is unknown, though enforcement officials have hazarded a guess. No doubt the percentage of

[1] Nearly all the area in and around the southern Appalachians is dry. Only a few counties in Kentucky and Tennessee permit the sale of whisky or other alcoholic beverages except beer. Some counties even exclude beer.

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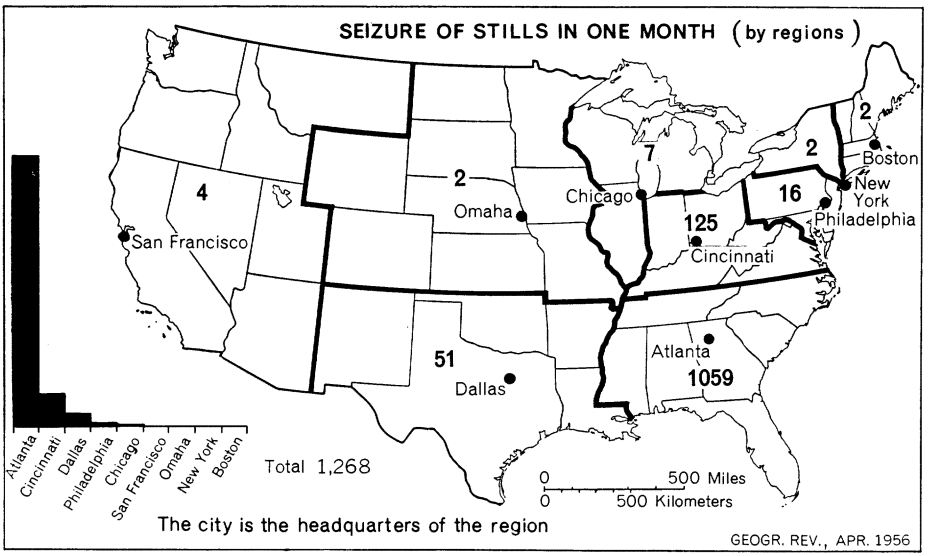

FIG. 1—Number of stills seized by federal agents in one month (September, 1955), by Internal Revenue Regions.

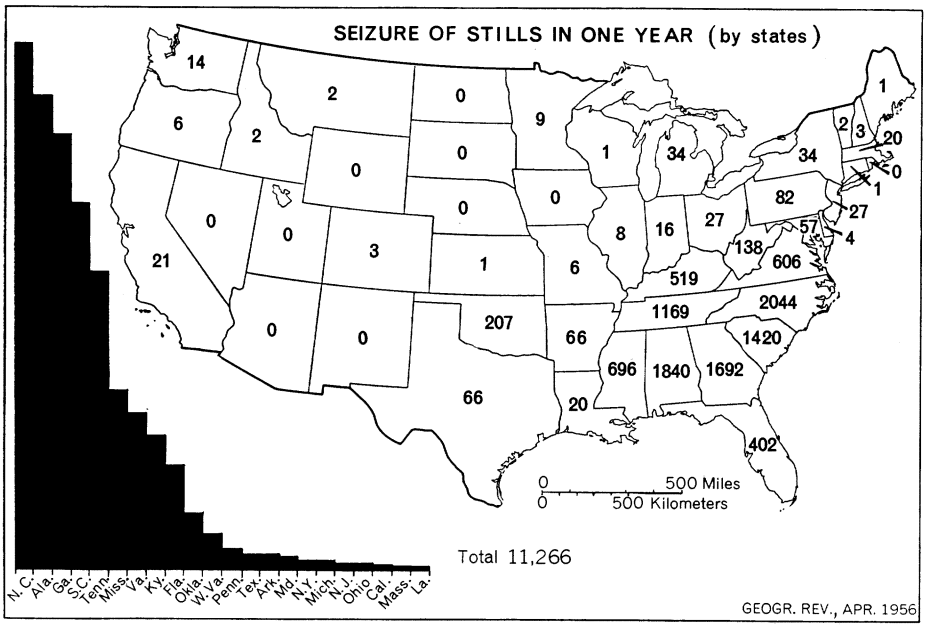

FIG. 2—Number of stills seized by federal agents in one fiscal year (July 1, 1954–June 30, 1955), by states.

captured stills is higher today than it was in the past; the airplane and the helicopter are efficient spotters of stills in the forests and woodlands, and large operations can often be detected by smoke and by the odor of the mash. Yet movement in difficult terrain is necessary for the capture of a still, and the agent must maneuver across hills and creeks, through dense brush, and along dead-end roads. The final rush may capture the still and the mash, but not the operators.

The routes and destinations of the whisky are also matters of conjecture. What percentage is consumed locally, in regional cities, or in distant localities is unknown. The estimated volume of production indicates an outflow of some magnitude. Highway patrols are familiar with some of the carriers, usually "souped up" cars capable of traveling 90 to 100 miles an hour or more. Many of them are caught; others, outdistancing or evading their pursuers, complete their runs and deliver their cargoes into outside channels of trade. The Tennessee State Alcohol Tax Division is aware that some illicit whisky enters incognito into interstate commerce, and it attempts to stop the outflow into Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois.

Estimates of Tennessee Moonshine Production

The moonshine industry of Tennessee is concentrated principally in the eastern third of the state. Although some of the raided stills are purely family enterprises for home consumption, there is not a single county in this Appalachian area without some illicit manufacture of whisky. Commercial production, however, has apparently become the business of a few.

Officials of the Tennessee State Alcohol Tax Division of the Department of Finance and Taxation estimate a state moonshine production of about 1,664,000 gallons a year. If all of it is consumed within the state, the annual state tax loss, based on a tax of $2.00 a gallon, is $3,300,000. Obviously, much of this is a paper loss, since all but half a dozen counties out of the 95 in the state are dry. With a federal tax rate of $10.50 a gallon, the loss to the federal government is more than five times the state loss.

Federal agents of the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax division of the Internal Revenue Service in the southern Appalachian region place the illicit whisky production in the North Carolina Appalachians at probably five or more times the Tennessee production, in Georgia at three to four times more, in Alabama at three times, and in South Carolina at about the same; the Kentucky production is much smaller. If we assume that these official estimates are reasonably correct, and that the Tennessee output is a conservative million and a half gallons, we get the astounding total for the southern

Appalachians of 21 million gallons or more a year. The economic geographer can hardly afford to overlook this activity! It is "big business," even if engaged in by only a relatively few persons. Compare the outflow with that of legally distilled whisky in the entire United States (Table I).

TABLE I—WHISKY PRODUCTION IN THE UNITED STATES
(*In tax gallons*)

1946	147,465,000	1951	205,702,000
1947	167,995,000	1952	103,544,000
1948	129,597,000	1953	66,765,449
1949	149,595,000	1954	102,541,246
1950	118,760,000	1955	103,927,044

Source: Internal Revenue Service.

CHIEF CONCENTRATIONS OF TENNESSEE MOONSHINING

The state of Tennessee is divided for judicial purposes into three so-called Grand Divisions, East Tennessee, Middle Tennessee, and West Tennessee (Fig. 3), and the inhabitants speak of themselves as being from these areas. Official estimates of weekly moonshine production in these divisions are 24,000 gallons in East Tennessee, 6000 in Middle Tennessee, and 2000 in

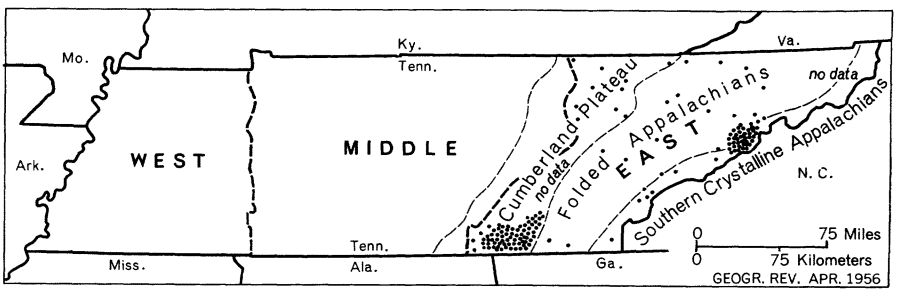

FIG. 3—Approximate number of stills captured each month in East Tennessee, and their location with respect to the several physiographic provinces of the Southern Appalachian Region. Each dot indicates one still.

West Tennessee. Middle Tennessee includes part of the hill lands of the state, particularly the western Cumberland Plateau, and much of the 6000-gallon estimate is for this physiographic region. In other words, most of the whisky is distilled in the eastern, or hilly and mountainous, half of the state, whether or not production is administratively in East Tennessee. West Tennessee's coastal-plain terrain is generally flat; its views are unobstructed by hills or mountains. This is the cotton-producing and "Deep South" part of the state, and the attitudes of its rural inhabitants are quite different from those of the East.

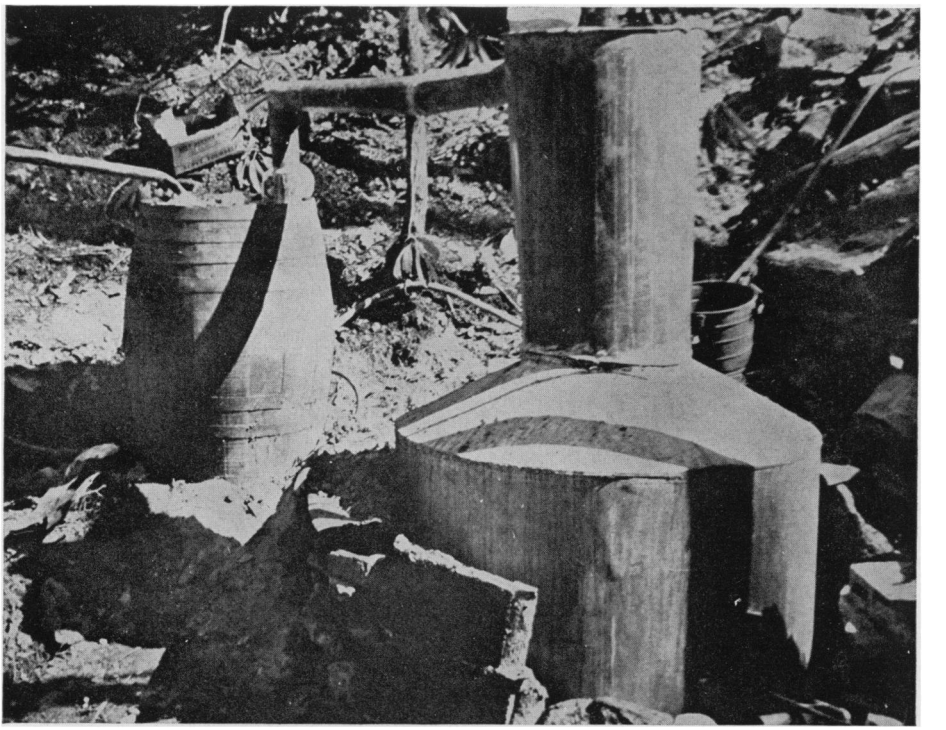

FIG. 4—Large copper still (capacity approximately 500 gallons) of the type found in the true mountains of the Tennessee–North Carolina border. The main concentration of these large stills is in southern Cocke County and adjacent areas. (Photograph courtesy Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Division, Knoxville.)

FIG. 5—Battery of 1200-gallon stills after a raid by federal agents near Cosby, Cocke County. Puncturing of the copper pots renders them useless. The location alongside a small stream, or branch, is characteristic; the branch provides the water required in the operation. (Photograph courtesy *Knoxville News Sentinel.*)

Within the "most productive" East Tennessee region[2] two large centers of moonshine activity stand out, highest both in number of stills raided and in quantity of output. One center lies in the true crystalline-rock mountains of the southern Appalachians, the other on the Cumberland Plateau (Fig. 3). Each bears a relationship to market: the first is not far removed from Knoxville, and the second is close to Chattanooga—in fact, an area on the plateau within 10 miles of Chattanooga is one of the most frequently raided in the state.

The mountains of the southern Appalachians lie along the eastern border of the state. Southern Cocke County (east of Knoxville) has long been recognized as the "capital of moonshining" in Tennessee. Federal and state agents capture an average of about 40 stills a month in the county, and federal agents estimate that some 75 per cent of the illicit whisky of East Tennessee originates there. Stills are large, mostly 500-gallon capacity (Fig. 4); occasionally a still of 1000 gallons or more falls to the raiders (Fig. 5). Inaccessible coves and valleys, steep mountain slopes, and river and creek sites are desired locations. From this center a large-still region extends northeast and southwest along the face and base of the mountains; thus, although an average of only four stills a month are captured in an adjacent county, they are usually of 500-gallon size; in May, 1955, a 1200-gallon still fell to government agents.

The Great Valley of East Tennessee lies between the southern Appalachians and the Cumberland Plateau. It is the physiographic region of the Folded Appalachians, the ridge-and-valley countryside. Every county in this region has some moonshining activity, based usually on locations along the ridges (Fig. 8) rather than in the open agricultural valleys. Even Knox County, in which Knoxville is located, has yielded many small stills and an occasional large one, and during 10 months in 1954–1955 the sheriff of Anderson County, in which Oak Ridge is located, captured 35 stills. Stills are small, commonly of 50–100-gallon capacity, and production is for the home market, for home use (Fig. 9), or for sale by the drink, in contrast with the true mountain area, where the production is "wholesale." The total number of these stills is unknown. During the preparation of the 59,000 acres of the Oak Ridge Reservation for the townsite and atomic plants, 22 stills were found, left behind by the rural population in the rather rapid evacuation of the area. Stills are hidden in the woodlands on the ridge sides and crests, and in rough karst country in the valleys and on lower slopes. Some of the

[2] The federal government maintains enforcement offices at Knoxville, Chattanooga, Greeneville, and Johnson City.

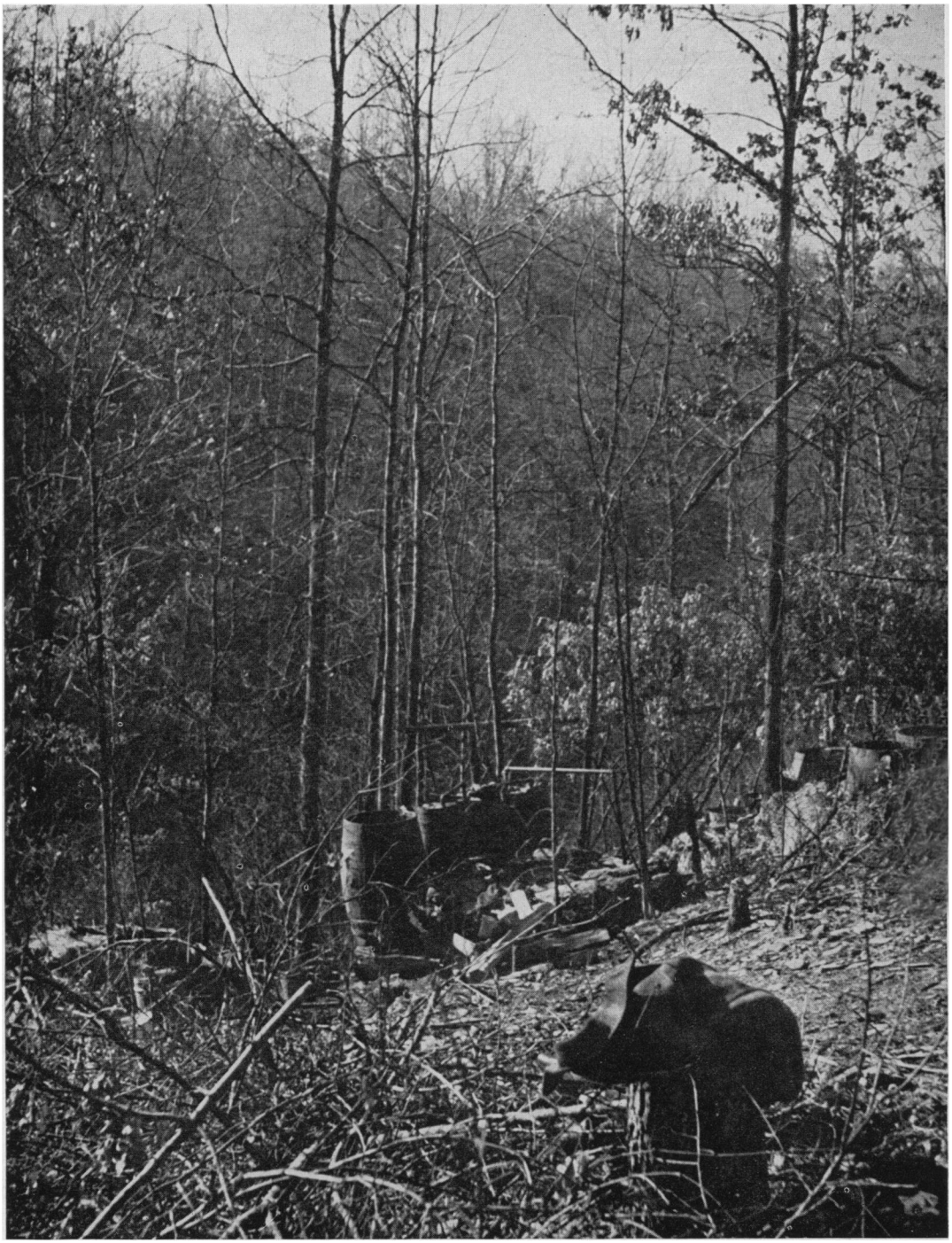

FIG. 6—Hillside still in an inaccessible spot. All materials must be carried to and from the site, whose chief advantage is that of seclusion. During much of the year the dense foliage effectively screens the operation from the ground and from the air, but from November to April the chances of discovery are greater. (Photograph courtesy ATT Office, Knoxville.)

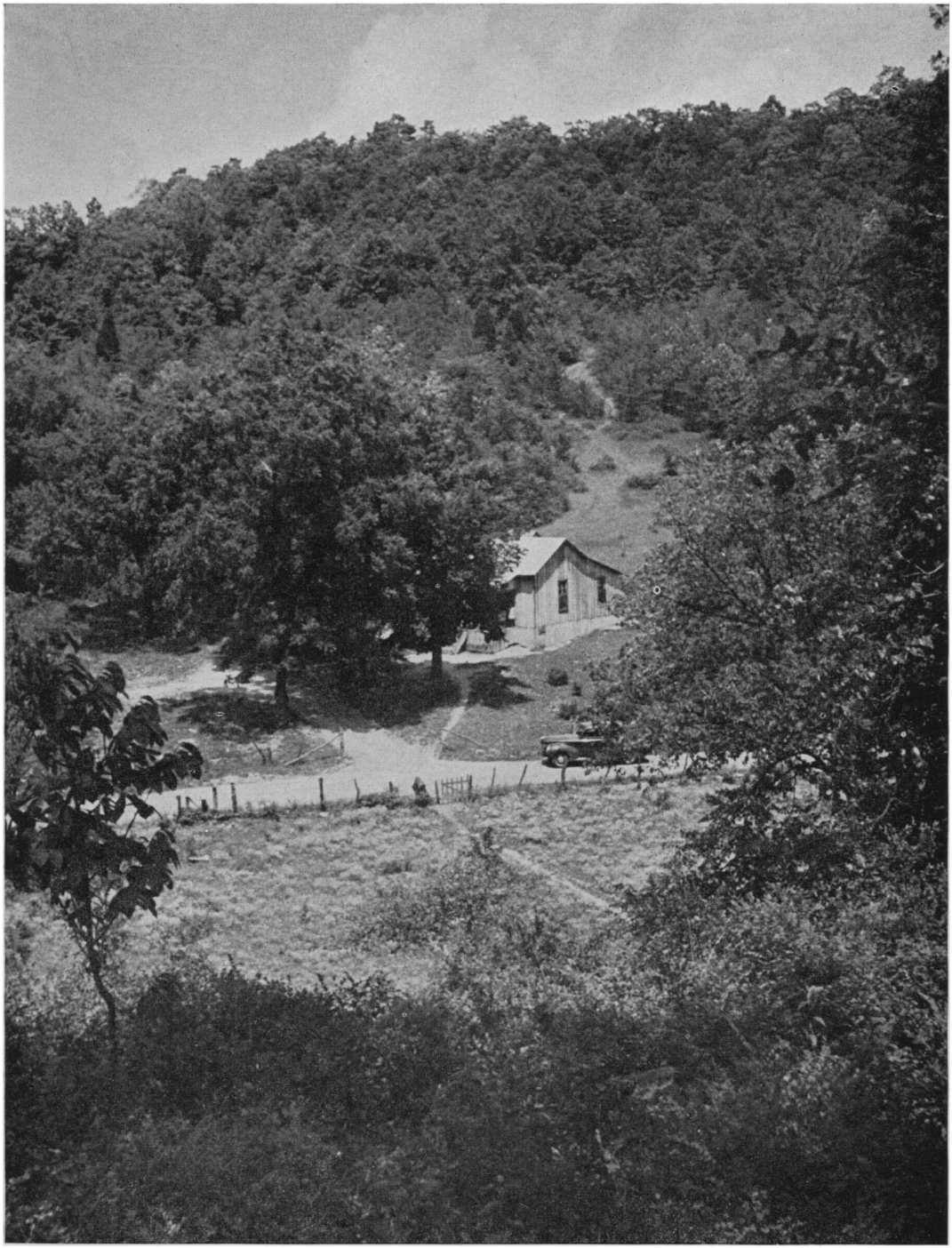

FIG. 7—Hill-country cabin of a known moonshiner, recently raided, who possesses only a limited amount of agricultural land (many farms have less than nine acres) and little apparent means of support for a large family. The trail to the ridge top behind the house led to an upland still. (Photograph courtesy ATT Office, Knoxville.)

FIG. 8—Corn whisky distilling outfit of moderate size being examined by a federal agent following a raid. This still occupies a ridge-top site typical of most of the operations in the ridge-and-valley region. (Photograph courtesy ATT Office, Knoxville.)

FIG. 9—Corn whisky still in the small-still region of the Folded Appalachians, with farmstead of operator in background. These "home" stills, whose production is largely consumed on the spot, are commonly located close to the house. (Photograph courtesy David D. Dickey.)

karst country possesses relief of 200 to 400 feet and sinkhole pockets 200 feet or more in depth. In much of this region county sheriffs raid the stills and are important in the control; the small federal and state forces are compelled by circumstance to concentrate on the large operations in the mountains.

The Cumberland Mountains and Cumberland Plateau exhibit conditions of each of the afore-mentioned regions. The northern two-thirds is generally small-still country. Two of the roughest and least accessible counties, south of the Kentucky border in the Cumberland Mountains, probably have more stills than fall to the raiding forces; they average only about two "losses" a month. Southward, where the Cumberlands are flat-topped and a true plateau, the size of still apparently increases. The largest are in the part of the plateau adjacent to Chattanooga, cut by the Tennessee River gorge and deep tributary valleys. Blocklike segments of the plateau are almost isolated, heavily wooded, and virtually inaccessible. Hamilton County, in which Chattanooga lies, "loses" some 30 stills a month; the next county to the west, Marion, about 40. In Marion County stills are located at escarpment bases, on slopes, in deep valleys, and on tabular outliers. Suck Creek Mountain, a narrowed stretch of Walden Ridge (the part of the Cumberland Plateau between the Great Valley of East Tennessee and the long, linear Sequatchie Valley), is almost as notorious a moonshine area as southern Cocke County.

Illicit manufacture of corn whisky continues westward on the Cumberland Plateau into Middle Tennessee. This part of the state, however, possesses its own "manufacturing district," apparently based on the Nashville market as well as on the hill-country location. Hickman, a hilly county in the Western Highland Rim, west of the Nashville Basin, is one of the five "most productive" moonshine areas in the state, on the evidence of raids and the experience of government agents. Neighboring counties of the rim share somewhat in the activity.

Economic and Marketing Factors

To what extent is the corn-whisky industry attributable to economic pressure in a region of low income where corn is a leading crop? Certainly the fact that this low-value bulk crop can be readily converted into a more valuable and more easily transported product has been influential, more so in the past than at present. Incomes have been increased, though the figures probably do not show. This circumstance combined with a traditional way of life has led some persons to engage in a more lucrative enterprise without particular trouble to their consciences.

Transportation has invaded the southern Appalachian hill lands rapidly,

FIG. 10—This large "commercial" still used corn syrup (note carton of syrup cans) rather than sugar. One recent raid on a large still disclosed the use of rubbing alcohol as an ingredient. (Photograph courtesy ATT Office, Knoxville.)

FIG. 11—Small still built on log platform, partly over a stream. The moonshiner could reach the site by wading in the branch and thus not leave a land trail. (Photograph courtesy ATT Office, Knoxville.)

especially since World War I, and has opened the way to distant markets. Good roads, nearly all of them graveled and many of them paved, have been provided by the respective states. The moonshiner is able to dispose of his product several hundred miles from its region of manufacture, and "specialists" in production have appeared, who devote their full time to the activity. The increasing taxes on legally manufactured alcoholic beverages during recent years and the existence of dry territory throughout much of the adjoining region have provided the moonshiner with a special market situation, in which the customer (or consumer) seeks his goods and services and there is little or no need for him to employ "salesmen." The main problems are secrecy of manufacture in a secluded location, alertness toward the appearance of revenue agents, and transportation of the wares to market.

The Human Element and Dispersion

The Scotch-Irish and American frontiersmen helped "transport" the corn-whisky industry throughout the southern Appalachians during the early days of settlement. Their attitude toward corn whisky was apparently different from that of the early New Englanders. As settlers from New England moved west by way of the northern routes, such as the Mohawk Valley, the whisky still did not appear, at least not in any great numbers. However, literature is replete with references to the problem from central Pennsylvania southward, and history calls it to our attention through the governmental troubles during the Whisky Rebellion. After the period of railroad and highway building, with the resulting improved accessibility of the northern Appalachians, the problem became less acute there; indeed, in many areas it disappeared. Government agents now find the illicit still in the Northeast mainly in urban areas, often in warehouses or dwellings, and operating in an entirely different manner and milieu from those of its southern hill-country counterpart.

How much of the present southern-Appalachian attitude is a carry-over from past generations? How much is owing to the lack or difficulty of transportation in the hill and mountain lands? It must be remembered that, as late as 1900–1910, large areas of the southern Appalachians, even in the valleys of East Tennessee, were primarily in a stage of subsistence agriculture except near a few main railroad lines.[3] Undoubtedly there must have been a tradition of local whisky making in certain mountain and hill-country

[3] Before 1870 practically all of East Tennessee had a self-sufficing economy. After this date the Knoxville and Chattanooga areas and a few others developed rapidly as commercial and industrial centers. In 1903 the Tennessee Legislature enacted a no-fence law; this marked the elimination of sheep for home-

locations, and these have acted as centers of dispersion. When a lumber company in northeastern Wisconsin decided to concentrate on selling its cutover lands to Kentucky mountaineers instead of specializing in immigrants (the usual target of the cutover-land salesman) and succeeded in bringing in large colonies of native Kentuckians, the moonshine still appeared with them.[4] Wisconsin suddenly, and for the first time, found itself confronted with an illegal moonshine industry. In the Cascade foothills of Washington, settlements of Cumberland Mountains people in the Cowlitz Valley introduced a moonshine industry there.[5] Many other such dispersal associations are known to exist.

Some Reflections on the Future

The recent advent of improved transportation in the hill lands and the increased taxation of legal liquor pose other unanswerable questions. Are groups of outsiders or local "combines" moving in on the age-old corn-whisky industry of the southern Appalachians? Is the hillsman moonshiner being reduced to the status of manufacturer alone, and is his product (aside from that destined for purely local consumption) being distributed by specialists—specialists in transportation, in distribution, and in sales? The evidence from raids indicates that the small moonshiner still grows his corn and produces corn whisky, but many of the largest stills, those in the 500-gallon class and above, use sugar, yeast, and similar ingredients as raw materials, and corn (or other grain) is not significant. Furthermore, the large operators possess no other apparent means of support; after a jail term they go back in "business." If specialization is increasing, in response to a combination of many factors, what will happen to the long-established way of life of the small mountain moonshiner? Subsistence farming in the hills and mountains of the southern Appalachians is on the way out. Each census records fewer true subsistence farms.[6] Perhaps "subsistence" manufacture of corn whisky too is destined to go "commercial."

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spun woolen clothing. By 1900–1910 the exodus from the farms of East Tennessee to the textile mills of Knoxville and of the Carolinas was in full swing. See B. H. Luebke: Problems Created by the Douglas Reservoir in East Tennessee, *Journ. Tennessee Acad. of Sci.*, Vol. 29, 1954, pp. 246–259.

[4] These were the so-called "Ky" colonies of northeastern Wisconsin, mainly in southern Forest County and northeastern and eastern Langlade County.

[5] C. L. White and G. T. Renner: Human Geography (New York and London, 1948), p. 379.

[6] Partly this is owing to changed census definitions. Partly it is owing to the present-day need for cash and the expansion of the burley-tobacco industry. Partly it is the result of industrialization and the shift of the farm to a "part-time farm" basis, with the operator working in industry but residing on the land. See Loyal Durand, Jr., and E. T. Bird: The Burley Tobacco Region of the Mountain South, *Econ. Geogr.*, Vol. 26, 1950, pp. 274-300, especially pp. 275–277.